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*Sergei Prozorov*

#### *EX NIHILO IN MUNDUM: A REPLY TO PAIPAIS*

I am thankful to Vassilios Paipais for his incisive and stimulating review of my *Void Universalism* books, which not only succeeded in succinctly addressing the key issues raised in the two books but also launched what I very much hope will be a wider debate about the relation between ontology and world politics. In this response I will address two main points of my disagreement with Paipais. The first concerns the possibility of deriving universalist axioms of world politics from the ontology of the void discussed in the first volume, *Ontology and World Politics* (OWP), while the second pertains to the limitations on the world-political subject addressed in the second volume, *Theory of the Political Subject* (TPS). While Paipais's reading of my work is as attentive and generous as an author could hope for, it is grounded in quite a different perspective on the ontology of politics and it is these differences that I would like to accentuate and elaborate on in this response.

Let us begin with the question of the content of universalist world politics. Whereas the main ambition of my project is to derive universal political axioms from the ontology of the void, Paipais concurs with this ontology but rejects the possibility of any such derivation: 'Nothing authorizes the production of any content, no matter how axiomatic, prior to its mediation through positive political orders'. In OWP I discussed such a stance, which characterizes a variety of post-Heideggerian and Lacanian approaches in continental political thought, as *meta-political*. In my reading, meta-politics affirms the void as the condition of possibility of all positive worlds, yet also posits it as the condition of impossibility of any political content transcending these positive worlds. As a result, the only form world politics could take is a radical pluralism with no possibility of adjudicating between a plurality of particular worlds. In my view, such a disposition is overly pessimistic about the possibility of universalist politics, or perhaps betrays its scepticism or unease about it in the guise of the claim for its impossibility. While it is evident that the void itself could not possibly authorize the derivation of any content (or, which amounts to the same thing, would authorize the derivation of any content whatsoever), its entry into positive worlds in the disposition I term being-in-the-World (exemplified by Heidegger's anxiety, boredom or any other fundamental moods) provides us with a mode of being exhausted in being itself, a worldly being subtracted from all positive predicates and exposed as 'whatever' it is. It is important to insist that being-in-the-World is not a regulative idea, a transcendental principle, a deferred presence or a fundamental fantasy, but a patently real, phenomenologically accessible condition: surely, every

one of us must have been bored or anxious more than a few times. In this condition, the world and the World as void come together in their difference, yet, contrary to Paipais, what is produced in this difference is not nothingness or lack, but *ourselves*, beings in their being, taken up in our inconsistent multiplicity. It is the attributes of this condition that constitute the axioms of world politics: freedom, equality and community, understood as what remains when worldly beings are subtracted from their positive identities.

Thus, universal political content certainly emerges *in* positive political orders, but rather than being *mediated* by them, it is a result of *subtraction* from them. Most importantly, the axioms of world politics do not serve to conceal or compensate for the void at the heart of the world, as Paipais seems to suggest, but rather consist in its very exposure. Freedom, equality and community do nothing but *name* the not-all of every world, restoring the void as its condition of possibility. In this manner, the positive world is brought into a relation with the void of the World from which it emerges, or, in Paipais's terminology, politics is brought into a relation with the political. While the two sets of terms appear symmetrical, there is actually an important difference between them that helps pinpoint my divergence from Paipais. The World as void cannot really be equated with 'the political' in any meaningful sense: there is nothing political in the void, because there is nothing at all there. This is why I do not see any use for the notion of 'political difference' akin to the ontological difference: there is *only* politics and it *only* takes place within positive worlds, but it does so by traversing the void of the World whereby a worldly being appears solely in its being. While 'the political-politics' distinction tends to downgrade politics as merely ontic and elevate the political as somehow ontological, for me politics only makes sense as the *movement* from the ontic to the ontological *and back again*, the transformation of the world on the basis of the axioms derived from the appearance of the void of the World within it. It is precisely because the World really appears in the world that politics ends up with the ontological content of its own and the difference between politics and the political ends up annulled. If no such content were available, this difference would have remained insurmountable and yet also insignificant, since the ontic realm of politics would have been wholly sequestered from the ontological dimension. It is this separation that has resulted in the failure to think political universalism otherwise than as hegemony of particularism and overcoming this separation has been the main impetus for my book.

In Paipais's view, my attempt at such overcoming fails and this failure is not contingent but necessary. His verdict is framed in Lacanian terms: my attempt to derive universalist content from void ontology apparently demonstrates my sticking to the fantasy of emancipatory and egalitarian world politics, failing to come to terms with its fundamental impossibility. Clamouring for universals as 'lost objects' apparently entails that I remain on the level of desire, failing to move to the register of the drive, which is instead marked by the recognition of 'redoubled loss without reciprocity or consolation, constantly encircling the empty place, the void that remains inscrutable and indiscernible.' Now, we all know that denial is really of no use when dealing with psychoanalysis, since it only serves to reinforce the original diagnosis. I would therefore readily

accept remaining on the level of desire, the desire to go beyond the impasse of the meta-political discourse that affirms the void without recognizing any affirmative consequences of its eruption for positive worlds. In fact, I find this level to be rather more agreeable than the level of the drive as Paipais describes it, if only because the tragic pathos of 'loss without reciprocity or consolation' seems to me to be somewhat contrived. Instead, there is a clear surplus enjoyment in the fact that every affirmation may be revealed as naïve and misguided in its disavowal of a more fundamental impossibility, still stuck in the fantasy that the braver souls among us have already traversed to our advantage. In this sense, metapolitics reveals an uncanny similarity to political realism, which similarly insists on the need to come to terms with the uncomfortable truth of there being no universals. Yet, if something is uncomfortable, this does not necessarily make it true, and the limits of meta-politics appear to me to be entirely self-imposed: the impossibility of the affirmative passage from the World to worlds appears to be more a matter of prohibition, a call for the *renunciation* of desire or its redirection towards more legitimate, attainable or healthy objects. Moreover, I am not entirely sure about what gains a politics constituted by such a prohibition is expected to achieve, since its anti-utopianism does not leave us with much more than a resigned fidelity to the void itself, rather than its axiomatic consequences. For Paipais, the derivation of any content from void ontology is an illegitimate move that 'seeks to tame [its] destructive potential'. Yet, I do not see any such potential in the void ontology as such. The void itself is simply the void, from which, as we know, *nihil fit*. Fidelity to this void certainly enables the contestation of false, hegemonic universalisms as always already doomed attempts to cover up or fill this void, yet leaves us powerless when it comes to contesting particular worldly orders, which are all equally contingent emanations of/from the void. Rather than tame the ferocious force of void ontology, I venture to *amplify* the force of what, in a meta-political reading, is a tame position indeed. The political axioms derived from void ontology are, when affirmed to a maximal degree, inevitably subversive of and even destructive for positive worldly orders, exposing them to the indeterminate and hence in principle inexhaustible affirmation of freedom, equality and community.

Yet, could all of this be a fantasy? Are the affirmative effects of these axioms paradigmatic 'lost objects' (of presence, fullness, completeness) whose unavailability to us we must come to terms with in the ethics of psychoanalysis? I do not think so. Emancipatory movements, egalitarian legislation, communitarian practices are not lost but rather 'found' (invented or discovered) objects, which are ontically familiar to us all even if their ontological status remains undecided. This is an important point I would like to emphasize. I do not have the slightest interest in developing some new, hitherto unimagined form of politics, but rather attempt to provide an ontological account of the instances of universalist political affirmation recurring throughout history: from the great revolutions of modernity to civil rights campaigns, from anti-apartheid struggles to anti-globalization movements, from the Arab Spring to Euromaidan. While these and other events may have eventually been subsumed under the orders of the worlds in which they unfolded, at the moment of their eruption they undeniably transcended these worlds, subverting their immanent orders with the affirmation of freedom, equality and community that as such have

no other basis aside from the facticity of the being of all beings. It is therefore not a matter of deploying ontology for making up a new politics but of giving an ontological account of the political events that have taken place from time immemorial and which keep taking place today, often against all odds, miraculously transcending the worldly coordinates of the possible. Yet, if this transcendence appears miraculous, it is precisely because it disrupts the fantasy of one's world as all-there-is, revealing it as not-all. The traversal of the void in world-political practices is therefore resonant, if not exactly equivalent, with the idea of the traversal of the fantasy in psychoanalysis, with the caveat that in my approach the ontology of the void has nothing to do with loss or lack but rather leads to the affirmation of universalist political practices that, however rare and transient, are decidedly real.

Let us now proceed to the pathway of the world-political subject, outlined in the second volume of *Void Universalism*. Paipais argues that my view of world politics is simultaneously extreme (in its rejection of reformism and compromise) and unduly moderate (in its call for restraint in affirming political axioms in various worlds). I am largely in agreement with this assessment, even though, as I will show in what follows, it hardly amounts to a contradiction, since the 'extreme' and 'moderate' orientations pertain to entirely different things. The axiomatic content of politics cannot be compromised without world politics losing its universalist character and becoming subsumed under the particular order of the world: we all know how originally political movements such as liberalism and socialism, which in their own different ways, challenged the existing worlds through affirmation of universalism, often became means of maintaining the particular orders of these worlds against other political challengers. In order not to be subsumed under intra-worldly governmental rationalities, world politics must affirm its axioms to the maximal degree, which does not necessarily exclude reformism and compromise, if such maximal affirmation can be attained through them, which I do not in principle exclude. When it comes to the content of politics, my stance is indeed prescriptive.

Yet, given the infinite number of positive worlds, *whether* and *how* to act politically in a given world are entirely different questions and here any prescriptive orientation would obviously be a tall order. While void ontology prescribes *what* it would mean to act politically in any given world, it could not possibly authorize an injunction to do so in any world whatsoever, let alone in *all* worlds, since the notion of the world of all worlds is ontologically inconsistent. Any prescription to act politically in any and all worlds could only be based on the desire to transform the world in accordance with its ontological condition of possibility, i.e. create a world corresponding to the World. Yet, the ontology of the void obviously renders every such attempt meaningless: to desire to produce the World in the world is to reduce the existing world to the void, make nothing out of something.<sup>1</sup> This form of active nihilism must be rigorously distinguished from the transformative objectives of world politics, which in contrast makes something out of nothing and can do so in any world whatsoever, without these effects ever becoming totalizable into something like a

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<sup>1</sup>I address a particularly violent form of this nihilistic politics in my *Biopolitics of Stalinism: Ideology and Life in Soviet Socialism* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

‘perfect world’, the very drive for which is the worst temptation political thought could possibly yield to.

Yet, neither does void ontology authorize an injunction *against* the politicization of any particular world, hence it is not entirely correct that my approach *necessarily* calls for prudence or limitations. In fact, the greater part of TPS is devoted to demonstrating that the process of political affirmation encounters no limitation, be it ethical, epistemic or functional. Yet, precisely for this reason the freedom of the subject to politicize a world is simultaneously a freedom *not* to politicize it, to refrain from the production of the effects of the axioms of the World in the world without thereby negating these axioms themselves. It is easy to think of examples where a maximal affirmation of freedom, equality and community would be deemed undesirable, from endowing toddlers with voting rights to legislating the equality of all statements in science or of all works of art. It is also easy to understand the appeal of grounding this undesirability ontologically. Yet, in these and other cases it is impossible to infer a decision to politicize a world (or not) from the ontology of the void that is indifferent to particular worlds. While both moderate and radical political ideologies delude themselves and their supporters as being necessarily in the right, as if being itself was on their side, ontology neither prescribes nor proscribes politicization, hence both of these positions have equal ontological status, i.e. none whatsoever. This is why despite the sameness of its axiomatic content world politics displays remarkable intra-worldly variations: whether to politicize a world and how to politicize it remain strictly ontic questions with no foundation in void ontology. In short, while the content of politics is unconditional, its scope or form are not and remain up to the subject.

Paipais interprets this position in line with Arendt’s late work on judgment and argues that this stance is entirely contrary to Badiou who is otherwise the key influence on my approach. Yet, even though fidelity to Badiou is not among my top priorities, I believe that my notion of world politics largely accords with Paipais’s definition of Badiou’s politics as a ‘militant subjectivising truth process that prioritises fidelity to an unnameable Event’, especially if we supplement the technical term ‘truth’ with a more generic ‘affirmation’ and define the event in terms of the appearance of the World in the world. My three axioms of world politics, which in addition to Badiou’s equality also include freedom and community that he rejected (for no good reason!), operate in much the same way as subjectivising operators affirmed through practices of fidelity that are militant at least in the maximalism of their content, if not the extremism of their form. However, whereas Badiou’s ethics makes no distinction between the fidelity to ontological axioms (truths) and the production of their effects in actual worlds (perhaps because his theory of worlds was not fully developed at the time when this ethics was elaborated), I would insist on this distinction. There is no contradiction between affirming the validity of the axioms of freedom, equality and community in any world whatsoever (and hence refrain from negating them in a reactive or obscure manner) and exempting any number of worlds from the production of the effects of these axioms, whereby the latter figure in these worlds as literally ineffective. While Arendt’s judgment is certainly inapplicable to the former action (by virtue of the axiomatic status of political content), it might well be one of the modes, in which the subject decides to politicize or not to politicize a given

world. Indeed, in the absence of a universal rule concerning the politicization of all worlds, Arendt's version of Kant's reflective judgment is certainly an applicable tool for deciding on the specific pathway of political subjectivation, along with various other forms of practical reasoning. Badiou may well be hostile to Arendt's judgment when it pertains to the *content* of political affirmation, but whether he would reject its application to the *decision* that launches such an affirmation is a different question altogether. After all, despite Badiou's well-known ethical valorization of militancy, his theory is rather more refined than a call for the politicization of every world, if only because, for Badiou, there are *other types of truth* besides political ones and he is all too aware how scientific, artistic and amorous truths may be damaged or destroyed by the pursuit of political truths and, of course, the other way round.

[Badiou] never puts forward an operator of hierarchization among the four truth procedures, which, if we think about it, implies a thesis of singular radicality, truly uncommon. In the strict sense, for Badiou, a simple love story between two individuals is a truth *in the same way* as the French Revolution in its totality, or the theory of General Relativity. Nothing allows us to impart a superior dignity to events that involve a whole nation or a whole science, in relation to the event of an amorous encounter that merely involves two beings. This is why the ethics of truths never allows us to decide for certain what must be selected in a situation; each is here sent back to his responsibility as a plural subject, capable of multiple and ultimately conflictual truths. How to decide between the exigency of political violence, which is ultimately legitimate in certain circumstances, and the incalculable destruction of amorous relations, scientific inventions and artistic creations that this violence risks occasioning? The choice of a subject cannot be guaranteed by any law, any algorithm of the decision: love or revolution, austere theory or furious avant-garde, the individual is often convoked by divergent truths, and no one can replace its choices here and now between heterogeneous subjectivations. (Meillassoux 2014: 34)<sup>2</sup>

While there is an ethical injunction to truth and the axiomatic prescription of its content in Badiou's work, there is neither an injunction nor a prescription that would help one decide *which* truth to affirm, i.e. whether to opt for the politicization of a given world or the pursuit of scientific, artistic or amorous truths in it. Thus, even from the perspective of an unconditional injunction to truths *in general* there cannot be anything like a universal demand for universal politicization, only the demand that politicization, if and when it takes place, is indeed universal(ist). While I part ways with Badiou on a host of other issues, I am entirely in agreement on this one. While void ontology demonstrates the existence of universal axioms of politics, it says precious little not only about whether to apply those axioms in a given world but also about *how* they ought to be applied, what worldly form political affirmation must take. Thus, while I might be 'purist' about the degree of affirmation of political axioms, I am happily agnostic about the appropriate forms of

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<sup>2</sup>Question Meillassoux 'Decision and Undecidability of the Event in *Being and Event I and II*', *Parrhesia* 19, 22-35.

politics, which depend entirely on the context as well as the attributes of political subjects in question. This is why, for example, I neither have a quarrel with messianism, as Paipais appears to suggest, nor assign it any kind of privilege. Political messianism, be it Pauline, Benjaminian or Agambenian, is for me not an ontological standpoint (if only because there is nothing messianic in being, and the Messiah, whatever it is, is without being by definition) but a subjective disposition or a strategy that might or might not work in the world in question. In my *Ethics of Postcommunism* (Palgrave, 2009) I analysed both its relatively successful application in the late-Soviet period, when a quasi-messianic disengagement from the world brought the dreary and degraded system down in a relatively peaceful way, and its problematic position amid the ruins of the postcommunist period, where social order survived in the obscene form of the general state of exception. Judging by this and other examples, I would suggest that messianic politics only succeeds when it is animated by the sense of the imminent end of the order in question: while in our secular age one might be tempted to extract the logic of messianism from every eschatology and apocalypticism, this solution does not really work, since, as Jacob Taubes once argued, the messianic disengagement from the world only makes sense if one truly believes that the world in question is on its way out anyway.<sup>3</sup> If the end of the present order of things is indeed near, then the suspension of one's participation in it is not only ethically justified but also makes a lot of practical sense. This is why messianic theories marked by such a sense of the imminent end (Benjamin, Agamben) are far more convincing than those that reject all 'apocalyptic tone', voiding messianism of all messianicity (Derrida). In any case, there need not be a quarrel between messianism and what I call 'actual redemption of the world': after all, any messianic redemption worthy of the name is *also* actual and never merely potential, even if what it redeems is potentiality itself. What matters is that the effects of the ontological axioms are produced in the world, which may take place both through disengagement from the existing world order and varying degrees of participation in it.

In short, I see no contradiction whatsoever between a 'purism' with respect to political content and a 'prudentialism' with respect to the choice for political action and its preferable form. In contrast, such a 'prudential extremism' seems to me to be the only safe pathway between the Scylla of passive-nihilist renunciation of universalism and the Charybdis of the active-nihilist negation of worlds in the name of the void. By refusing to relativize its content, world politics ensures, however briefly and tentatively, its radical heterogeneity to intra-worldly government that grants its axioms validity in any world whatsoever. Yet, by reserving the possibility to refrain from the politicization of any given world, the subject affirms that while the axioms of world politics are *valid for all there is* (including non-human and non-living beings), politics is *not all there is*, there being other 'truths' or, more broadly, affirmative procedures, operative in and indeed constitutive of particular worlds, that would be endangered by a radical affirmation of freedom, equality and community. In short, there need not be a choice between the 'ontologization of phenomenal politics' and a 'politics of realist prudence' – *one can have both*, and only by having

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<sup>3</sup> Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).



both does ontological universalism become commensurable with ontic pluralism. Traversing the infinite number of infinite worlds, the finite political subject individuates itself by deciding on the worlds to be transformed in accordance with the universal axioms and the worlds, in which these axioms remain valid but not acted upon, ceding priority to a myriad of other possible modes of affirmation. This is why despite the fundamental sameness of world-political axioms we continue to dwell in an infinite diversity of worlds, periodically ruptured and transformed by infinitely diverse political subjects.